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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000760

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YEARGER/GAVITO  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR PTER MCAP MARR EAIR IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ELIAS MURR WANTS TO REMAIN MINISTER OF DEFENSE IN NEW CABINET

REF: A. BEIRUT 758

1B. BEIRUT 759

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a May 24 meeting, Defense Minister Elias Murr told Charge that he wanted to be the Minister of Defense in the next Cabinet. Murr rejects the idea of a Hizballah veto over his reappointment as MinDef and threatened President-Designate Sleiman last night, after Murr's return from Geneva, with a withdrawal of political support if he is not named MinDef. Murr wants the next Army Commander to be a strong officer with excellent credentials as a fighter and leader of men. For Murr, the two best candidates are Brigadier General Jean Kawahji or Brigadier General Boulous Mattar. Regarding the issue of the Prime Minister, Murr wants Sa'ad Hariri to be the next PM so "Sa'ad will stick around" to lead the Sunni community and keep them from moving towards extremism; however, Murr has heard that Saudi Arabia has told Sa'ad he should sit out the current government.

12. (C) Charge, accompanied by Defense Attaché, met with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Elias Murr at his residence in Rabieh on Saturday, May 24 at 5:00 p.m.

DON'T RELAX JUST YET  
CABINET SELECTION STILL COMING

13. (C) After meeting with Charge on the evening of 23 May (reftel), General, and President-Designate, Michel Sleiman paid a 10:00 p.m. call on MinDef Murr, we learned. In this meeting, according to Murr, Sleiman outlined his read on the division of the four "sovereign" ministries of Finance, Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs: Foreign Affairs would go to the Shia, Finance would go to the Sunni, Interior would go to someone neutral (i.e. a technocrat) and Defense would be chosen by Sleiman. This division, in Sleiman's calculation, would give one sovereign ministry to March 8, one to March 14, one neutral and one for Sleiman. Any other division, in Sleiman's calculation, would give too much political clout to one of the political groupings.

I WILL NOT BE EMBARRASSED BY HIZBALLAH  
MAKE ME THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE  
OR YOU WILL LOSE THE METN

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¶ 14. (C) According to Murr, Sleiman had said the previous evening that Hizballah does not want to hear anything about Elias Murr being Minister of Defense, citing his close relations to the United States as "the doer of U.S. policy in the Lebanese Army." Murr told us that he countered, asking Sleiman how he assessed Murr's role in the last three years of helping the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Furthermore, Murr asked Sleiman if this is how he wanted to begin his presidency, "on his knees in front of them." Murr said Hizballah should look to Bashar Al-Assad's negotiations with Israel instead of him if they want to raise the "enemy of the resistance" bogeyman. "I will not accept Hizballah embarrassing me!" said Murr.

¶ 15. (C) Clearly agitated, Murr grabbed his side in pain, and continued. "I told him (Sleiman) I would not accept a veto by Hizballah. I also told him he was weaker than former President Emile Lahoud when the Syrians were still here and I was able to accomplish my political agenda." Murr appears to have gone "all in" with his political clout from the Metn in this regards. Murr told us that he gave Sleiman an ultimatum, "there are two choices: one, I am Minister of Defense, or two, I will stay at home and you will pay the price in the next elections." Murr said he would withdraw the support of his eight MPs in the Metn if Sleiman sidelines him. By Murr's calculation, Sleiman needs Murr's votes to build his own coalition in the Parliament, as well as to have political top cover for unpopular decisions related to the Army. With Murr at the helm of the Ministry of Defense, Sleiman could claim

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political necessity for when allowing Murr to carry out policies that would be unpopular to Hizballah

¶ 16. (C) According to Murr, Sleiman agreed in the end to advocate for Murr to be the next Minister of Defense. "He seems lost, having to take notes," said Murr. Murr also reported that Sleiman had absorbed Charge's comments that the Doha agreement was a welcome first step, but that its implementation was key. Murr added that the dialogue between the President, new government, and "various parties" under Arab League auspices on state sovereignty would take place, but "not tomorrow or next week."

HARIRI SHOULD BE THE PRIME MINISTER  
SO HE WILL STAY IN LEBANON

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¶ 17. (C) Murr said he conferred with Sleiman about the next Prime Minister. Murr told Charge that he wants Sa'ad Hariri to be the next Prime Minister so that he can 1) lead the moderate Sunnis during a time when their confidence is shaken, 2) prevent Sunnis from sliding towards extremism due to the recent unrest, and 3) learn all of the technical and technocratic measures of how to run a government. "This will be a like a ten month training session for him," said Murr. Murr assesses that Hariri would learn from his mistakes and be able to correct all of them in a second term as PM after the next round of elections in 2009. According to Murr, Siniora is a good man to stand up to tier two opponents, but Hariri is the only one who can stand up to the tier one opponents like Michel Aoun or Hizballah

¶ 18. (C) Murr told us that, "I know Sa'ad. If he does not have a position of responsibility, he will be out of the country all the time." Murr told us that the next government is not going to do anything of significance except oversee the transformation of the Army. Murr does not anticipate any major decisions on economic reform or budgetary cuts. Although he strongly advocates for Hariri to be the next PM, he told us he has heard that Saudi Arabia is advising Hariri to stay on the sidelines. "He cannot go against the Saudis," said Murr.

YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES TO MAKE  
YOUR CASE TO THE PRESIDENT

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¶ 9. (C) In any case, Murr told us that they have to make up their minds by Tuesday, May 27, at 8:00 a.m. At this time, all of the political blocs have five minutes meetings with the President to make their case for who the President should nominate as the PM. "They don't even take time to have coffee," said Murr. Murr said that it is customary to inform the various groups during these meetings whether or not the President agrees with their nomination. "It is really bad manners to wait until midnight to call everyone and tell them you changed your mind," said Murr. As such, Murr estimates that the decision on nominating a PM will be concluded by that time.

THE NEXT LAF COMMANDER SHOULD  
BE SOMEONE WHO IS STRONG

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¶ 10. (C) Murr was not overly interested in discussing internal army affairs. Even so, he said that the next Army Commander needed to be someone who is tactically competent and someone whom all of the officers could trust. In this regards, Murr favors either BG Jean Kahwaji or BG Boulous Mattar to be the next Army Commander. Murr said he had discussed the Army Commander position with Sleiman as well. According to Murr, Sleiman is not comfortable with Kahwaji. Murr assesses this discomfort is because Kahwaji is someone who is very strong and Sleiman will have difficulty in controlling him as he aggressively pursues weapons that are not under the control of the state. As for LAF G-2 Intelligence Director Georges Khoury, Sleiman is very leery of him because he does not have the tactical experience saying, "Georges has been wearing a tie instead of a uniform for the last 17 years." Murr took this comment to mean that Sleiman remained firm in his

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opposition to Khoury becoming the next LAF Commander.

COMMENT

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¶ 11. (C) Murr, just back the night before from Switzerland with his children in tow, was not the most polished that we have seen him in the past. Clearly in physical pain, Murr clutched at his abdomen multiple times in the location where he still carries hundreds of metal fragments from his attempted assassination. Even so, Murr was sharp on the political and military issues and was firmly resolute in convictions about who should be the next MinDef. Although his name is still in play in some circles as a possible Minister of Interior, Murr appeared to have returned from his week in Geneva with the Ministry of Defense clearly in his crosshairs as his objective. End comment.

SISON